

## Memories of murder

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Exclusive interview by Robert McCrum

Anne Perry spent half her teenage years in a New Zealand prison, convicted of killing her best friend's mother. On her release, she moved to the other side of the world and for decades managed to bury her past. Under her new identity, she has become a prolific murder mystery writer – and her recurring theme is crime within the family.

In her life and work, Anne Perry is a woman of mystery. For years she wrote novels of crime and punishment in relative obscurity. Then, almost overnight, she became famous. News broke that her own life concealed a horrifying murder. Forty years ago, she had been a convicted killer. Perry maintains that she has long since forgotten the episode; she thought she'd left her past behind. But when she picked up the telephone in her Scottish retreat just after lunch on July 29, 1994, she discovered to her horror that her secret was out and – worse – was to be the subject of an international feature film. The fateful phone call came from Meg Davis, her literary agent in London.

“A ridiculous thing has happened,” Davis said. “There's a film being made about this murder, and some people have got hold of this crazy idea that it's you.” Perry, who is repeating this story to me while lying on a couch in her forest-green guest room, stares into the middle distance and says, “I think that was one of the worst moments of my life. I had to say ‘I'm sorry, but you can't.’ I said, ‘You can't refute it because it's true.’”

This moment of melodrama might have come from any of Perry's 22 books of crime fiction, which are set in Victorian England and have sold more than three million copies in the US and UK. Suddenly, the world she'd spent years making for herself, fell to pieces. “It was a matter of living each day at a time,” she says. “I thought it would kill my mother.”

Heavenly Creatures, the film which tells her bizarre tale with eerie verisimilitude, came out last year with great success. However much Perry tries to disavow it, it is based on painstaking research into her early life in New Zealand.

Now 57 years old, she became Anne Perry only in 1959, when she was 21. Before that, she was Juliet Hulme, a sickly English schoolgirl living in Christchurch. And it was as Juliet Hulme that in 1954 she was accused, tried and found guilty of helping to murder her best friend's mother.

For some years, she has lived discreetly in a converted stone barn on the edge of Portmahomack, a remote fishing village an hour's drive from Inverness in the far northeast of Scotland. From her study windows, there are breathtaking views of Dornoch Firth and the highlands of Sutherland. Across the yard, her friend, Meg MacDonald, who shares a cottage with a menagerie of cats and dogs, habitually cooks Anne's evening meal; Meg's son Simon, who lives a few miles away, works for Perry as unofficial chauffeur, gardener and man about the house.

Five, often six days a week, Anne Perry sits in her armchair and writes, with Verdi or Puccini playing in the background. Her bedroom is feminine and ruffled, but the rest of the

house – sitting room, dining room, kitchen, guest wing – feels gloomy, half-furnished, and un-lived in. Her mother, Marion Perry, who is 83, lives a mile away, in Irongate Cottage. She has a heart condition (a fact her daughter often mentions), but she has a temperament of steel. She, too, has had a life to rebuild. She was not unprepared for her daughter's news.

“It was always in the back of my mind,” she says. “Occasionally, I did say to Anne, ‘Have you ever considered that you are perhaps becoming too adventuresome?’ When she came to see me that day, I thought: ‘This is it.’” Even in old age, Mrs Perry radiates glamour, self-possession and worldliness. She is snappily dressed; rings glitter on her fingers; at four o'clock, she offers sherry. Now she sits very straight in her chair, speaking in the faultless English of her class. “I said, ‘There's no place for tears. If there's any crying, it's to be done much later.’” She told her daughter to draw up a list of friends and sent her back up the hill to do battle.

There's an undeniable frisson to a conversation with a woman who has taken a life. Perry is eager and friendly, but there is something damaged about her; she has the wariness that comes from the fear of expressing trust. She exclaims, with rare spontaneity, “It's extraordinary to talk and to be able to tell the truth.”

The “gym-tunic murderesses” still fascinate New Zealand. Victoria Park – where the girls, Juliet Hulme and Pauline Parker, bludgeoned Pauline's mother to death – retains its macabre associations. It was inevitable that a movie about the case would revive curiosity in Perry's fate. Ever since her release from prison in 1959, Perry has tried to become someone else. Now she has been forced to acknowledge that inside or alongside Anne Perry, the successful crime writer, stands the spectral figure of Juliet Hulme, the teenager who, when last seen by the world, had just been spared the gallows because she was too young for the death penalty.

She was born Juliet Marion Hulme on October 28, 1938, in Blackheath, London. Her father, Dr Henry Rainsford Hulme, was a brilliant Cambridge mathematician. Her mother, Hilda Marion Hulme (whose name became Marion Perry after her daughter's trial), was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. Family photographs show Hilda as a glossy, confident woman, and Henry as a reedy, bespectacled figure. His daughter remembers him as “a very gentle man, very compassionate, an absent-minded scientist.” She admits that she was afraid of her mother, and had a difficult childhood. She was highly-strung, demanding, and prone to illnesses. At six, Juliet nearly died from pneumonia.

When she was eight, her parents, who had been told their daughter would not survive another British winter, sent her to the Bahamas to stay with some friends of friends, the Brownes, and the impact of this exile on the young girl cannot be underestimated. She rejoined her parents when they arrived in New Zealand in 1948. Dr Hulme had been appointed rector of Canterbury University College, Christchurch. Juliet, now ten, had not seen her parents in nearly a year and a half. “I felt very alien,” Perry remembers.

The young Juliet, in snapshots, is pale and willowy, with wavy hair. She was always in the top three in any class and was good at everything except games. She liked to draw. She was, apparently, cocky, articulate, and a bit of a dreamer, with a special interest in history and poetry. Her classmates nicknamed her the Duchess, and Perry retains a certain duchessy

manner today. She is dogmatic in conversation, and displays an exaggerated belief in the power of positive thinking. She speaks repeatedly of the need for compassion.

In her 1992 novel *Defend And Betray*, Perry writes of a woman who has committed murder that “she will never cease to pay within herself for her act”. And I detect in her manner an unassuaged, inner despair. She is both like a child and like an adult, but the two parts seem not to connect. She reluctantly agrees that “reliving all this has been very, very difficult”.

Upon their arrival in the remote, provincial Christchurch of the Fifties, they took up residence in a colonial mansion outside town called Ilam House. Both Dr Hulme and his wife contrived, in their separate ways, to offend the locals. Henry Hulme, Perry admits, “did not suffer fools gladly and made himself much disliked”. Hilda was high-spirited and opinionated – “the sort of woman who is very attractive to men”, as Perry puts it. “There were quite a few women who were very jealous of mother,” she says, “which was part of the reason why they were only too glad to tear us down.” But that came later. Juliet was sent to a succession of boarding schools at which she was “absolutely tormented”. In May, 1952, when she was 13, Juliet enrolled in Class 3A, the top stream, at Christchurch Girls’ High School, and there she met Pauline Yvonne Rieper.

Pauline had suffered from osteomyelitis as a child; she had a scar on her leg, and she, too, didn’t quite fit in at school. She insisted on being called “Paul”, and her dark, curly hair was cut short like a boy’s. She is described by other members of 3A as “sullen”, “queer” and “stropky”, and she lived on Gloucester Street in a gloomy, rambling house that was known to some pupils as “the house with the rusty roof”. The Riepers were as dowdy as the Hulmes were glamorous. Pauline was the second of three girls, whose English-born mother, Honora, a shy, domesticated woman, ran 31 Gloucester Street as a boarding house to make ends meet. Honora wore a uniform and had “rules” tacked up around the house. Pauline’s father, Herbert (Bert), managed a fish shop and he had another family in Auckland; he was always short of money. Bert and Honora’s secret, which came out after the murder, was that they had never married, and Pauline was ultimately charged under Honora’s maiden name, Parker.

Pauline resented her parents. A note of teenage rebellion dominates her diary, an extraordinary document that, after the murder, proved her undoing. In her daily entries, she moans about household chores and lack of privacy. Her friendship with the solitary English girl Juliet seemed to open a door into a world of comfort and sophistication.

Unlike Perry, Pauline has managed to keep her adult identity a secret; in her absence, her journals have to speak for her. When asked about her, Perry at first claims defensively, “I don’t remember Pauline”, a variation on a constant refrain. “Good dark eyes,” she recalls when pressed. “Short, dark hair... good-looking... a bit heavy... bright.”

“They were absolute opposites in every way, but Pauline just made a beeline for Juliet,” their classmate Laura Cairns remembers. “It was what we called ‘a pash’.” The two were inseparable, eating meals together, sitting together in class, holding hands and giggling. They both exploited their illnesses to get out of organised games, and became increasingly lost in a private world of fantasy. They listened to the music of Mario Lanza, idolised the movies of James Mason, and revelled in tales of derring-do such as *The Prisoner of Zenda*. The two adopted pseudonyms – “Deborah” for Juliet, and “Gina” for Pauline. Later they

added “Pandora” and “Nina”. (It is a peculiar feature of this story that almost all the main participants appear with at least two different names.)

Over the years, the nature of Juliet and Pauline’s friendship has been scrutinised up and down. Who was the leader and who the follower? Was the friendship homosexual? At the trial, the prosecution portrayed the two girls as unfeeling and unnatural, arguing that their relationship led inexorably to matricide. Anne Perry says that this is “absolute rubbish” and adds, “we were not lovers”. She explains – convincingly, I think – that as a teenager in the 1950s, she was naïve about sexual, especially homosexual matters. Slowly, she casts her friendship with Pauline in more conventional terms. “We did a lot of things together, ordinary things,” she says. “It was not obsessive.”

But Pauline’s diaries for 1953 and 1954 depict an adolescent friendship inching towards hysteria. She describes the things the two girls did together – horse-riding, listening to records, talking on the telephone. They also took baths together, they sometimes slept in the same bed (and worried about adult discovery). Pauline’s writing reflects a mood of mutual joy and a growing sense of isolation from reality. On March 17, 1953, she writes that, “After school I biked out to Ilam with Juliet to get my camera and snap each other... We have decided how sad it is for other people that they cannot appreciate our genius.” A few days later, she describes an Easter visit she made to the Hulmes: “3rd April. Today Juliet and I found the key to the 4th World... We saw a gateway through the clouds.”

In May of that year, when a test revealed that Juliet had tuberculosis on one lung, she was sent away to a sanatorium, where she stayed until September. Once again, she found herself deserted by her parents, who were on a lecture tour. Pauline wrote to her every day. “We had a continuous running story which we wrote turn and turn about,” Perry remembers. “It wasn’t romance, more adventure, with sword fights and things. Pauline was my one connection with the outside world.”

This, it turns out, is not strictly true. Juliet had many visitors: classmates, Canterbury College students and family friends. Nevertheless, it is a vital element of her explanation for the murder of Honora Parker that she should have a profound debt of obligation to Pauline; there is an emotional, not a literal truth to her mis-remembering these months. On September 9, Pauline wrote, “I believe I could fall in love with Juliet.”

Looking back on the final months of 1953, Perry’s mother reluctantly agrees that there was “a sense of concern” at the “unhealthy” nature of the girls’ friendship. Both Juliet and Pauline were sent to the local doctor. Pauline was suffering from what would now be called bulimia and growing desperate:

20th December. Mother woke me this morning and started lecturing me... She has brought up the worst possible threat now. She said that if my health did not improve, I would never see the Hulmes again. The thought is too dreadful. Life would be unbearable without Deborah (Juliet). I wish I could die.

At the same time, Hilda Hulme had fallen in love with another man: Walter (Bill) Perry, a much-decorated, twice-wounded soldier with a Clark Gable moustache. Major Perry had travelled to New Zealand as an “industrial consultant” and he had been introduced to Hilda by Dr Hulme himself. By December, 1953, he had been installed as a tenant at Ilam. Pauline’s diary vividly describes the breakdown of the Hulme family. On April 23, there

was a cataclysm: “Deborah” had come upon Mr Perry and Mrs Hulme in bed together, drinking tea. The next day Pauline rode her bicycle out to Ilam and found herself drawn deeper into the Hulme family drama. Dr Hulme told the two girls that he and his wife were going to divorce. Pauline writes that Juliet and she “were near tears by the time it was over”. “I was devastated for my father,” Anne Perry says now, “but I don’t remember feeling angry toward my mother”.

In his notes before the trial, the chief psychiatrist for the defence, Reginald Medlicott, describes Juliet’s discovery of her mother’s infidelity as “the final blow”. Medlicott’s report goes on, “The girls were shocked and severely upset... There is more than a suggestion that it (the crime) might have been a ritual murder of all the ‘mother figures’ – witch-like, unloving, cruel, and relentless.” Hilda Hulme evidently thought so. In one of her pre-trial interviews she asked, “Do you think Juliet really wanted to murder me?”

Once the Hulmes began to organise the breakup of their family, Juliet and Pauline were forced to confront their imminent separation. Dr Hulme was to return to England with his children via South Africa; Juliet would be billeted there with an aunt, and Jonathan, the younger son, would go on home with his father, while Hilda would remain with Major Perry in New Zealand. The two girls plotted to have Pauline accompany Juliet abroad and, not for the first time, it was sensible Honora who put her foot down. Pauline was now in a state of all-out confrontation with her. “Anger against Mother,” she writes, “boiled up inside me as it is she who is one of the main obstacles in my path.”

On June 10, with Juliet’s departure date set for July 3, Pauline was invited to stay at Ilam for a farewell visit. The two girls – overwrought, volatile, and in a fever of mutual devotion – continued to explore their sexual fantasies and began to entertain the unthinkable, and idea that Pauline euphemistically expressed as “moider”:

12th June. We came to bed quite early and spent the night very hectically.

13th June. We had very amusing discussions about God, Christ and the Holy Ghost... We came to bed early feeling very excited. We spent a hectic night going through the Saints. It was wonderful! Heavenly! Beautiful! And Ours! We felt satisfied indeed. We have now learned the peace of the thing called Bliss, the joy of the thing called Sin.

18th June. We planned our various moiders and talked seriously as well.

19th June. Our main idea for the day was to moider Mother. This notion is not a new one but this time it is a definite plan which we intend to carry out.

The girls’ scheme was to suggest that Honora join them on a farewell outing to Victoria Park, a craggy, wooded recreation area in the hills overlooking Christchurch. Pauline’s mother welcomed her daughter’s apparent change of heart.

The plot to kill Honora Parker was extraordinarily naïve, and seems to have been based on the idea that a single blow to the head would be enough. On Tuesday, June 22, there’s a final entry in Pauline’s diary: “The Day of the Happy Event. I am writing a little of this up on the morning before the death. I felt very excited and the night-before-Christmas-ish last night.” Before she left Ilam that morning, Juliet collected a half-brick from beside the garage and placed it in her bag, together with a bright-pink stone taken from a brooch. Hilda Hulme later told the court she noticed how “radiantly happy” her daughter seemed. At

2.30pm, the two girls and Honora arrived at Victoria Park. They bought tea, cake, and lemonade from a small kiosk near the entrance, and then set off for a walk down a long, steep path through the rustling eucalyptus and pine trees. There was no one about.

After about half a mile, near a little wooden bridge, Juliet surreptitiously placed the pink stone on the path. They all walked on for a while, and when the track gave out they turned back. As they approached the bridge for the second time, it seems that Pauline pointed to the pink stone and her mother bent down to look. Pauline took the brick wrapped in the lisle stocking from her shoulder bag and began to hit her mother on the head. Honora's screams were heard by a farmworker in the fields across the ravine, but ignored. Juliet joined in, taking the brick from Pauline. Honora fell, and then one of the girls held her by the neck while the other continued to hit her. Both girls later said that once they discovered that a single blow was not enough, they felt they had to go on. Honora started to vomit, and there was a great deal of blood.

At 3.30pm, Agnes Ritchie, the owner of the kiosk where they had earlier taken tea, saw Pauline and Juliet running towards her. They were drenched in blood, and they were in shock, shouting that there had been a terrible accident. Both girls asked for their fathers and eventually they were driven back to Ilam by Dr Hulme. The two girls claimed that Pauline's mother had sustained her injuries from a fall. Mrs Hulme bathed them and put them to bed. (In Anne Perry's book *Cardington Crescent*, Charlotte Pitt visits her sister, who has been accused of murder; she puts her arms round her "and let her weep as she needed to, holding her close and rocking a little back and forth, murmuring the old, meaningless words of comfort from childhood".)

When the police found Pauline's diary open where she had left it in her room, the truth began to sink in. The girls gave conflicting interviews to detectives, but Pauline was taken into custody late that evening. Juliet was arrested next day. Anne Perry refers to that afternoon in Victoria Park as "nightmare time" and adds, "I felt like I was going to my own execution." A long pause. "Time stands still at such moments. I don't know if it was seconds or minutes." She has blanked out the murder, she says, but "it was violent and it was quick."

What the scene-of-crime photographs actually reveal is a horrific killing that would have taken some time. Honora lies sprawled on her back in a pool of blood; rivers of blood flow down the path from her head; her false teeth have come out, and the little finger on her right hand had been almost severed by the brick from her trying to ward off the blows. The stocking lies, discarded, next to the body, along with Honora's feather hat, gloves, and handbag. Honora received some 45 lacerations, and death was attributed to shock associated with multiple wounds to the head.

When Anne Perry is asked why she did it, she offers several, well-rehearsed justifications. She will claim, for instance, that she was suffering the side effects of the medication (isoniazid and streptomycin) she had been taking for her tuberculosis. She will speak of her "agony for my father". She will say that she was "backed into a corner" by Pauline, who was "throwing up after every meal and wasting away in front of us", and finally, she will play her ace: "Pauline felt her life was in the balance," she says. "I believed she would take her own life. And so I helped her. It was a stupid thing to do, but I felt I couldn't have her suicide on my conscience after she had stood by me (in the sanatorium)... I don't have any

feeling for Pauline now, but it's ugly to blame someone else. You can say I believed she would kill herself. Yes, I was in a state of hysteria."

In Perry's novels, violence is a family affair, and the crime invariably happens to someone known, or even related, to the detective Charlotte Pitt, who is described as "a well-bred woman... of terrifying honesty". In *Resurrection Row*, the heroine muses, "Actually, to kill someone, you have to care desperately over something, whether it is hate, fear, greed, or because they stand in the way between you and something you hunger for." When I ask whether this sentence is autobiographical, Perry replies, "You'll notice that I always have the person dying as painlessly as possible. The thought of inflicting pain horrifies me. I've done it once, and it sickens me... You will notice in my writing," she adds, "that when people behave badly it's because they have no time to think and are rushed by events."

Perry has come to believe that her trial at the Supreme Court in Christchurch was a travesty of justice, but the court record simply reflects the procedures of the Fifties. Today, the case would be held in family court, and both girls could expect anonymity and counselling. In 1954, Juliet and Pauline were tried as adults in the full glare of the media, but, being under age, were denied the right to testify. The defence counsel for Parker and Hulme entered a plea of not guilty to the charge of murder, by reason of insanity, and the trial centred on a simple debate: were the girls "bad" or "mad"?

The defence argued "folie a deux" – joint insanity. The prosecution, citing the evidence of Pauline's diaries, contended that "this plainly was a callously planned and premeditated murder, committed by two highly intelligent and perfectly sane but precocious and dirty-minded girls."

The defence was hampered by the fact that both girls had signed full confessions before their parents engaged lawyers – a questionable procedure. Nevertheless, Medlicott, the psychiatrist on behalf of the defence, stated that the girls' relationship was homosexual, and that he believed they were insane. Dr Kenneth Stallworthy, an expert witness for the prosecution, observed that it was "extremely common for adolescents to go through a stage in which they do have an intense and sometimes physical relationship with another member of their own sex". He added that it was normal for "such adolescents to grow out of that homosexual stage".

The judge, in his summing up, more or less directed the jury to discount the insanity defence. The all-male jury reached their verdict in less than three hours, and the girls, being under 18, were sentenced to "detention during Her Majesty's pleasure". The judge ordered that the two be sent to separate institutions and that they should never meet again. The Department of Justice determined that Juliet was "the more dominant personality and the leader of the two", so she was flown to Auckland, to a maximum-security prison called Mount Eden, which was, and still is, a brutal Victorian fortress.

Perry describes Mount Eden as "pretty horrific". There were several hundred men and about 40 women, almost all of them much older. "There were lifers, prostitutes and abortionists," she remembers. "I had some pretty unpleasant experiences, from lesbians, basically." The day began at 5.45am with slopping out. The prisoners washed in cold water and then had breakfast, usually lumpy porridge. Juliet was sent to work in the laundry, where her tasks included washing the inmates' canvas sanitary towels. There were no games, no library, and

exercise was only permitted at weekends. The regime broke Juliet's health, and she was transferred to the sewing room under the supervision of Grace Powell. "Juliet was quality," says Mrs Powell, now in retirement in Auckland. "You couldn't help but like her. I treated her like a daughter." (Mrs Powell still corresponds with Perry.)

Perry did have the privacy of her own white-washed cell. Here, she could recite her favourite poetry – G K Chesterton, James Elroy Flecker, and Rupert Brooke – and her survival instinct and resilience were extraordinary. "I felt desperately lonely, but I never felt it was anyone's fault," she says. "Within the first three months, I got down on my knees in the dark and said I was wrong, and I was sorry for what I had done. I told myself to stop running away."

After four and a half years, Juliet was moved to another prison and a milder regime. She was given two afternoons a week tuition, passed her university entrance exams, and took a typing course. Then, shortly after her 21st birthday, without any warning, she was released. She was given a new passport in the name of Anne Stuart – Stuart for her maternal grandmother – and taken straight to Auckland airport. "I was in a state of shock," she says.

Back in England, she went to live with her mother and Bill Perry in Hexham, Northumberland. When I ask how her family came to terms with her crime, Anne replies, "We've none of us referred to the past. It's too painful." She took on her stepfather's name and became Anne Perry. "I never lied, but I evaded," she explains. "I would say I'd been ill and I'd been abroad."

In Hexham, Perry worked as a secretary, then moved to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where she found a job in a department store. She also worked as a stewardess for a local airline, and later as assistant purser on the Hull-Gothenburg ferry. In the freewheeling Britain of the Sixties, she was in some ways much older than her contemporaries and in other ways much less experienced. "I'd never dated, danced, worn make-up or stockings," she says.

What she wanted to do was be a writer and go to America. Eventually, she was granted a visa and arrived in San Francisco in January, 1967. She had found a job as a nanny, but the household was "unhappy", she says, and she was miserable, "a stranger in a strange land". In prison, and after her release, Perry had explored, and rejected, various kinds of faith. Now, alone once more, she had an epiphany. Shortly after arriving in California, she joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints and became a Mormon – a conversion, she says, that made her feel "enlightened, fired-up, and lifted".

"I do believe I owe my survival to the Mormon Church," she says. "The Mormons believe we are all children of God and that the fall from perfection is part of life." This theology of forgiveness and forgetting has clearly helped her to feel she suffered enough for her crime. "I can't be bothered with people who make a profession out of suffering. Dwelling on your own past pain is self-pitying and a damned nuisance. In the Mormon Church, if you have something you were ashamed of, you want it washed away, and if you repent, it can be. It's washed out of the Book of Remembrance in Heaven."

Perry moved to Los Angeles, and found work as a limousine dispatcher, a secretary for a post-production company, and an insurance underwriter. Her new life was now giving her confidence and success. She lived alone, and had, she said, a number of "red-hot affairs" with men. "Once or twice, I thought I'd found the right person and I prayed hard that it



would work, and then I prayed with gratitude that it hadn't! ... I'm a writer and I need to write."

In 1972, Perry lost her job and, hearing that her stepfather was seriously ill, she decided to come home. Dr Hulme, now Chief of Nuclear Research at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment, Aldermaston, gave her a monthly allowance of £100, and also provided a lump sum with which she was able to move into a rundown cottage in the village of Darsham, Suffolk. She resolved to work half-time to earn a living and to devote the rest of the day to her writing. She had been turning out fantasy stories for years, but now, in search of a marketable genre, she composed historical romances set in Arthurian England, the Crusades, the English Civil War and the French Revolution. Her literary models were Charles Kingsley, Arthur Conan Doyle and Anthony Hope. "My parents fielded God knows how many rejection slips," she says. Towards the end of 1976, she acquired a literary agent, and within a few weeks she had a contract for a mystery story set in Victorian England.

In 1979, the Cater Street Hangman became her first published book. For the next ten years, Perry produced one Pitt mystery a year. She could have produced more, she says, but her publisher, St Martin's, would not let her. In ten years, her sales more than doubled.

The Pitt books are characterised by well-observed period detail, a fascination with miscarriages of justice and the high drama of the law, and an intense scrutiny of family secrets, above and below stairs. Anne Perry says she enjoys detective stories because she likes to see "masks being ripped off, and to see what people will do under pressure, when they are afraid..." "Crime fiction is not my choice. I'm obsessed with what is right and what is wrong."

Through the Mormon Church in Lowestoft, she met Meg MacDonald, and once again the daughter of privilege made friends with a woman from the other side of the tracks. Meg, who was born with a hole in her heart and now draws a disability pension, ran away from home at the age of 17. Like Perry, she joined the Mormon Church in extremis, after the sudden death of her third child.

"She would get in a right tishwas whenever the subject of capital punishment came up," MacDonald says, recalling about how the truth about Anne emerged. "I began to suspect something when we studied the bible. She was irrationally against King David sending Uriah the Hittite into battle so that he could have Bathsheba. We were discussing the idea of deliberately killing someone, and it just came out." She continues: "It's a bogey that's always haunted her. She's always been afraid to give herself to people because she was afraid that if they discovered the whole truth they wouldn't like her any more. She is very, very insecure. She looks confident, but underneath there's a lost little girl."

In 1988, MacDonald moved to Scotland, and Perry followed her. "I came to visit Meg," she explains, "and fell in love with the place." In the Highlands, Meg took on a role which has uncanny echoes of Juliet's earlier collaboration with Pauline. "We think about names and characters," Meg says. "Then Anne writes it out in long-hand, a chapter at a time. Anne will read the chapter to me, and we'll go through it with a red pen. We're always thinking of new things. We went to the Canary Islands and worked on eight books. We chapterised and characterised for two weeks."

Perry also relies upon the woman she calls “Meg no 2” – Meg Davis, her London literary agent. Davis has played a decisive role in improving Perry’s contracts, and has devised a new series, featuring a new detective, William Monk. In the words of the blurb, Monk has been left “with only half a life, because his memory and his entire past have vanished”. (Predictably, Perry resists the obvious interpretation. “I’m not amnesiac, for Pete’s sake. I just don’t choose to remember certain things.”)

Pauline Parker, part of the past Perry wishes to forget, is more difficult to track down. Those who protect her will only speak on condition of anonymity. But her presence in New Zealand has helped to keep the story alive.

When the trial was over, Pauline had been sent to Arohata Prison, near Wellington, on the North Island. She was, at first, intensely depressed, and found the loss of Juliet almost unbearable. Slowly, she appears to have become a model inmate. She wrote chatty letters to her father and made good progress with her studies. Without Juliet, her fantasy life dwindled. She told one correspondent that “in theory I still write, in practice I do not”. She did, however, continue to sustain several identities, signing herself “Nina”, “Rosemarie”, “Yvonne” and “Pauline (ugh loathsome name)”. Quite early in her sentence, she decided she wanted to become a Roman Catholic nun. The church turned her down but continued to play a vital role in her life. Gradually, the hysteria surrounding her name cooled down. In 1958, the Parole Board, evaluating both girls, noted that “individually neither would have committed this crime, and it was a one-in-a-million chance that their association was of such a nature as to lead to planning this outrageous act”. When Pauline was finally released, in November 1959, she settled in the North Island and took the name Hilary Nathan.

For the next five years, she was on probation. She worked in a variety of manual jobs (washing bottles in a hospital, for instance), studied for university, and in 1960 began an affair with a female co-worker, which caused her probation officer some concern. She did, however, gain her university degree. The last official reference to Hilary Nathan occurs in February, 1967, when she is reported teaching at an English girls’ school.

After that, she becomes a figure of mystery. She is known to have returned home in the seventies and to have taken a new name. She has kept in touch with her family, but from a distance, and has pursued a number of different careers, including work with the mentally handicapped. Reports of her state of health and mind vary. Some says she is “troubled”, “sad”, even “suicidal”. Others indicate a more robust condition, pointing out that she has been adept at covering her tracks.

Her story has become part of contemporary New Zealand folklore. In 1991, Julie Glamuzina and Alison J Laurie published *Parker and Hulme: A Lesbian View*. In the same year, Michelanne Forster, an American playwright living in Christchurch, staged her play *Daughters of Heaven*. More or less simultaneously, Frances Walsh and the film-maker Peter Jackson, who describe the story as “an open wound that has never healed”, had begun their research for the script of *Heavenly Creatures*. For the first time in years, there was widespread speculation about the girls’ identity. By the time *Daughters of Heaven* transferred to Wellington, there was a rumour circulating that Juliet Hulme had become “a writer called Perry”.

Lin Ferguson, a reporter for the Sunday News, a New Zealand tabloid, did some research in the local library and in a who's who of authors and found the gossip to be true. Ferguson now says that she agonised over her decision to report the story. "I knew I was going to blow up this woman's life after 40 years," she says, adding that it was Perry's career as a murder mystery writer that overcame her doubts. Strangely, neither Ferguson nor any rival reporter has made the same effort to unmask, or even to track down, Pauline Parker.

Back in Scotland, Anne Perry is slowly coming to terms with her latest identity. "No, I don't think the world is ever going to forget that I am both of these people." There is a note of resignation in her voice. "It's not ever going to go away, but maybe I shall live in such a way that it will not be what people remember of me." So she continues to write, obsessively, perhaps in the hope that she can somehow bury her terrible past in a mountain of fiction.

One morning, towards the end of several days of interviews with Anne Perry, I asked her, "What is your worst fear?"

"My worst fear about all this," she replied, "is that you will find Pauline."